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America: The Land of Free?

The United States is often characterized as a “free, capitalist” nation when being compared to its European neighbors. There and in other nations on various continents, nationalization of certain key sectors is the norm; here that is not the case. Here, we have mass privatization of some of our most important industries: insurance, energy, and prisons. Some will argue that this is good, as it ensures low prices and a better product for the consumer. While this has the possibility of being true for healthcare and energy, the question that this presents is: How free can a nation be if for-profit prisons are allowed to exist?

All throughout the United States, mass incarceration is a stark reality. The United States of America ranks 2nd in prisoners per 100,000 population, only to be preceded by Seychelles, a republic resting on an archipelago off the coast of Africa. Note that the 707 prisoners per 100,000 population is a higher number of prisoners per 100,000 population than nations notorious for violation of not just civil rights, but human rights: Cuba (510), Russia (470), and China (124/172). ProRepublica’s “[*By the Numbers: The U.S.’s Growing For-Profit Detention Industry*](#)” provides an insightful look at the numbers, in regard to how many of these prisoners are detained in private facilities. According to the article, “more than half of Louisiana’s 40,000 inmates are housed in prisons... as part of a broader financial incentive”. It also goes on to say that, “the number of prisoners in private facilities increased by 37 percent between 2002 and

2009 (Lee). Huffington Post, in their article "[Private Prisons Profit From Immigration Crackdown, Federal And Local Law Enforcement Partnerships](#)" goes on to highlight that "nearly half of all immigrant detainees are now held in privately run detention facilities" (Kirkham). The fact that, when compared to its international neighbors, there are so many people incarcerated in the United States would should make one question as to whether something else is going on to influence the colossal increase we have in the United States incarceration rate. All signs would point to there being a much greater scheme at play.

Referring once again to ProRepublica's "*By the Numbers: The U.S.'s Growing For-Profit Detention Industry*" Corrections Corporations of America, a publicly traded private prison company, owns and operated 66 correctional facilities in the United States. CCA also "recorded \$1.7 billion dollars in 2011". \$3.7 million was the "executive compensation for CEO Damon T. Hininger in 2011" (Lee). With such an incredibly lucrative market for industrialists, it is no wonder new prisons are sprouting up all over the United States. However as anyone with any sort of background experience in a business related field knows, we live in a demand-driven economy. Essentially what this means is that there has to be a demand for the good or service that a certain business is providing, in order for that business to succeed in the free market. There is fortunately, for prison tycoons, no shortage of demand for prisons in the United States. Many contend that the mass demand for prisons in the United States is not a natural demand, but rather a demand inflated by lobbyists influencing public policy.

Lobbying itself is another massive industry in the United States. Lobbyists, often former members of government, will try and influence the political policies of the US government. Lobbyists are paid a lot of money by special interest groups (often big businesses, labor unions, or activist groups) to go to state capitals and the nation capital to try and influence politicians to

take a specific course of action. Often times, incumbent politicians are offered large sums of money to support a specific interest group's proposals, which while the US Supreme Court ruled that is free speech, it is most certainly bribery. The prison industrial complex just so happens to be a major player on Capitol Hill. Alan Greenblatt's article for *Governing* "[*What Makes Alec Smart?*](#)" explains that the CCA and GEO Group (another for-profit prison company; yes these two companies are competitors) are members of the American Legislative Exchange Council, often referred to as ALEC, which is a D.C. based public policy organization that promotes free-market principles such as privatization. Essentially ALEC is the crown gem of lobbyist organizations in the United States. Lobbyists from ALEC head up to Capitol Hill to advocate for policies to keep prisons full: mandatory minimum sentences, three-strike sentencing requirements, and harsh drugs laws. In fact, according to Alan Greenblatt of *Governing* magazine, "About 40 states passed ALEC's Truth in Sentencing model bill, which requires prisoners convicted of violent crimes to serve most of their sentences without the chance of parole." (Greenblatt) The mantra "tough on crime" that is often heard from politicians running for office, often in inner cities, is a complete farce. Being "tough on crime" is not stopping crime, in actuality it is creating more of it by putting non-violent offenders into prisons with people that actually need to be incarcerated. This is, as aforementioned, all part of a bigger scheme though: the plan to continue making executives and stockholders of the prison industrial complex large sums of money.

In the end, the prison industrial complex is toxic to the very fiber of American society. The system is making criminals off of non-violent offenders by means of harsh drug and sentencing laws, while the executives and investors behind closed doors are making millions

in returns. If America wants to live up to being the “home of the free”, it needs to bring an end to the prison industrial complex by nationalizing all prisons in the United States.

Works Cited

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